

Sūrah 74

Al-Muddaththir

(The Cloaked One)

(Makkan Period)

Title

The word *al-muddaththir* featuring in the opening verse of the *Sūrah* forms its title.

Period of Revelation

The first seven verses of this *Sūrah* were sent down in the earliest Makkan phase. Some reports, on the authority of Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh, cited by Bukhārī (K. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, Sūrah al-Muddaththir*), Muslim (K. *al-Imān, Bāb Bad' al-Wahī*), Tirmidhī (K. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, Sūrah al-Muddaththir*) and Ahmad etc. (3, 306 and 392), even suggest that these are the very earliest verses of the Qur'ān revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him). However, it is almost the consensus of the Muslim Ummah that verses 1–5 of *Sūrah al-'Alaq* are the earliest Qur'ānic revelation sent down to the Prophet (peace be upon him). However, what is established from authentic reports is that after the revelation of this passage from *Sūrah al-'Alaq*, no further revelation was received by the Prophet

(peace be upon him) for quite some time. Then, when the revelation was resumed after this gap, it started with the verses of *Sūrah al-Muddaththir*. Imām Zuhrī recounts the details as follows:

For a long time, revelation to the Prophet (peace be upon him) remained suspended, and it was such a period of deep grief that at times he would climb up to the top of the mountain in order to throw himself down, but whenever he came to the edge of the peak, the angel Gabriel appeared, reassuring him that he was God's Messenger, which would set his mind at rest and allowed him to regain his composure. (Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī).

After this, Imām Zuhrī offers the following narration, on the authority of Jābir ibn ‘Abdullāh: the Messenger of God describing the period of break in revelation (*Fatrat al-Wahī*) said: “One day as I was walking, I suddenly heard a call from the heavens. As I raised my head, I saw the same angel who had visited me in the cave of Hirā’, sitting on a chair hanging between the heavens and the earth. This struck such a terror in my heart that on reaching home quickly, I said: ‘Cover me up! cover me up!’. My family members covered me with a quilt or a blanket. It was then that Allah revealed to me the opening verses of *Sūrah al-Muddaththir*. From then onwards, revelation became intense and regular.” (Bukhārī, Muslim, Ahmad and Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, 23, 401)

The remainder of the *Sūrah* (verses 8–56) was sent down on the first *Hajj* season after public preaching of Islam commenced in Makkah. Ibn Hishām in his book on *Sīrah* has described the story at length, which we will cite later.

Subject Matter and Theme

As already indicated, the following five verses of *Sūrah al-’Alaq* were the first to be revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) which ordained:

Recite in the name of your Lord Who created man from a clot of congealed blood. Recite and your Lord is Most Generous, Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know.

(*Sūrah al-’Alaq*, 96: 1–5)

It was the first experience for the Prophet (peace be upon him) to receive divine revelation all of a sudden. It did not spell out clearly the nature of his great mission and the future course of his action. He was given only a brief initiation and was left alone for some time. This allowed him to weather the heavy strain caused by the first experience and mentally prepare himself for receiving revelation and for shouldering the Prophetic mission in the future. When revelation resumed after the intermission, verses 1–7 of *Sūrah al-Muddaththir* were sent down to him. He was commanded now for the first time to arise and warn mankind about the consequences of following the wrong path which they had chosen and to proclaim God's glory in the world where others were being magnified without any right. Along with that, he was instructed that in keeping with his lofty mission, he was obliged to lead a pure and exemplary life in every respect, and to guide fellow human beings sincerely, without any worldly or selfish gain. Then in the last sentence, he was exhorted to bear with all the hardships he had to endure in carrying out this mission for the sake of his Lord.

As the Prophet (peace be upon him) commenced preaching Islam in response to the above divine command and started reciting the Qur'ānic *Sūrahs* revealed to him in quick succession, the people felt alarmed and it provoked a great storm of opposition and hostility in Makkah. A few months passed in this state until the *Hajj* season approached. This caused consternation among the Makkan disbelievers, for they apprehended that if the Prophet (peace be upon him) started visiting the caravans of the pilgrims arriving in Makkah from all parts of Arabia and recited the highly effective and spellbinding Qur'ānic passages before them in their camps, his mission will spread far and wide very quickly and will influence countless people. Therefore, the Quraysh chiefs held a consultative meeting, resolving that a propaganda campaign against the Prophet (peace be upon him) be launched among the pilgrims soon after their arrival in Makkah. After they agreed on this, *Walīd ibn Mughīrah* pointed out to the assembled people that if they said contradictory things against the Prophet (peace be upon him) they would all lose their credibility among the people. They should better reach consensus upon one opinion and follow

it without any disagreement. Some proposed that he be branded a soothsayer, but Walīd rejected this proposal, saying: "By God, he is not a soothsayer. We know the soothsayers: what they rant and what they utter has no resemblance whatsoever with the Qur'ān". Others suggested that he be dubbed a mad person. Walīd disagreed, saying: "He is not possessed either. We have seen mad persons and lunatics. The way one talks and behaves irrationally and foolishly in this condition is known to all. Who will then believe that the message presented by Muḥammad is the ranting of a mad person or delirium of the one in a fit of lunacy?" Some others advised that he be projected as a poet. Walīd stressed: "No he is not a poet for we know poetry in all its forms. The Qur'ān does not fall into any category of poetry". Another suggestion was that he be discredited as a magician. Walīd refuted this too, affirming that the label of a magician also did not apply to the Prophet (peace be upon him), for he and others are aware of the ways and tricks of magicians. He further remarked: "Whatever accusation you make; it will not be accepted by the pilgrims. By Lord, his speech is immensely delightful, its roots are very deep and its branches are laden with fruit." Abū Jahl then urged Walīd that people will never be pleased until he suggests a way out. He asked for some time to think over it, and after prolonged thought and reflection, he told them that the nearest thing they can tell the Arabs is that he is a magician. The message presented by him was causing great dissensions within families, resulting in the separation between father and mother, between parents and children. They all agreed on Walīd's plan. As part of this organised strategy, Quraysh delegations called on pilgrims and warned them against the Prophet (peace be upon him), saying that a great magician has emerged. They portrayed him as a consummate magician whose magic is causing great distress and divisions within families. However, it proved to be counterproductive, as in doing so the Quraysh themselves made the name and mission of the Prophet (peace be upon him) known throughout Arabia. (*Sīrah* of Ibn Hishām, vol. I, pp. 306, 308) That Walīd had drawn this strategy at Abū Jahl's insistence is reported by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī in his *Tafsīr*, on the authority of 'Ikrimah (23, 429).

The second section of this *Sūrah* carries a critique on the above incident. The outline of the contents of the *Sūrah* is as follows:

Verses 8–10 warn those opposing the truth that they will face the terrible consequences of their rejection on the Day of Judgement.

Verses 11–26, without naming Walīd ibn Mughīrah, spell out how God bestowed numerous bounties on him yet he had the audacity to oppose the truth so blatantly. Attention is drawn also to the conflict in his mind, for, on the one hand, he was fully convinced of the truth of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Qur’ān, but on the other, he did not want to lose the privileged position he enjoyed within the Makkan society. The latter prevented him from embracing faith, and after a hard and prolonged struggle with his own conscience he finally resolved that he should seek to discredit the Prophet (peace be upon him), declaring him to be a magician with a view to dissuading people from accepting his message. His blatant falsehood is openly exposed and it is said that, notwithstanding such temerity, he expects to receive more divine blessings. However, he has made himself fully deserving of the Hellfire.

Verses 27–48 relate the horrors of Hell and specify what type of people will be consigned to it.

Verses 49–53 diagnose the root cause of the disbelievers’ malaise. Since they have no fear regarding the Hereafter and look upon this life as an end in itself, they flee from the Qur’ān as frightened wild asses flee from a lion. Prompted by the same, they lay down unacceptable preconditions for their acceptance of Islam. Even if all their conditions are met, they will still be not inclined at all towards faith because of their denial of the Hereafter.

It is finally declared that God does not stand in need of anyone’s faith and will therefore not meet anyone’s preconditions. The Qur’ān stands out as divine guidance and admonition for everyone; they are free to accept or reject it. God has a right that the people should feel terrified at the thought of disobeying him. It befits His glory to pardon those who adopt piety and God-consciousness though they had committed various acts of disobedience in the past.